

# A Study of the Subtitle Translation of *Coco* from the Perspective of Skopos Theory

Weixuan Shi<sup>1</sup>, Ziqian Wu<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>English Department of North China Electric Power University, Baoding, Hebei, China

DOI: [10.36348/sijll.2024.v07i03.002](https://doi.org/10.36348/sijll.2024.v07i03.002)

| Received: 30.01.2024 | Accepted: 06.03.2024 | Published: 12.03.2024

\*Corresponding author: Ziqian Wu

English Department of North China Electric Power University, Baoding, Hebei, China

## Abstract

In the context of the continuous advancement of globalization, intercultural communication is increasingly frequent. Films, as an art form, play a crucial role in promoting cultural exchange. With skopos theory as the theoretical framework, this article analyzes the subtitle translation of the film *Coco*. Through the analysis of specific cases, it is observed that translators adhere to the skopos rule, the coherence rule and the fidelity rule of skopos theory during the subtitle translation of *Coco*, and effectively address the problem of differences between target language culture and source language culture by adopting translation methods and strategies such as free translation and domestication so as to facilitate effective movie-watching experience, foster communication, and achieve cross-cultural communication.

**Keywords:** Subtitle Translation of Films; Skopos Theory; *Coco*.

**Copyright © 2024 The Author(s):** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, with the rapid development of economic globalization, more and more international films have entered China. As a new form of media, films play an important role in promoting cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries and enhancing the friendship between peoples of different countries. As an important part of transnational film release, subtitle translation is also an indispensable part in the process of cultural exchange between China and foreign countries. Consequently, the effective translation of film subtitles has emerged as a significant and pressing subject matter.

*Coco* is an animated film set on the Day of the Dead in Mexico, which tells the wonderful story of Miguel, a boy who loves music and reunites with his deceased relatives on the Day of the Dead. The film released in the United States on November 22, 2017, and released in China on November 24, 2017. It achieved the 90th Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film in 2018. Based on Skopos theory, this article discusses the translation methods and strategies adopted in the process of film subtitle translation, including free translation, amplification, domestication, etc., hoping to provide some reference for future subtitle translation.

## 2. Overview of Skopos Theory

Skopos theory was founded and developed in the 1970s by German linguists Katharina Reiss, Hans

J-Vermeer, Justa Holz Manttari and Christiane Nord. Skopos theory gets rid of the shackles of equivalence theory and brings translation into the theoretical framework of cross-cultural communication (Ding Linlin & Wang Linhai, 2014). Skopos theory holds that translation is a cross-cultural communication activity based on the original text with a clear purpose and intention. According to skopos theory, translation should follow the skopos rule, the coherence rule and the fidelity rule.

Vermeer, a German translation theorist, thinks that the skopos rule is a dominant principle for all translation activities and the skopos rule plays a decisive role in the whole translation. The skopos rule thus reads as follows: “translate/ interpret/ speak/ write in a way that enables your text/ translation to function in the situation in which it is used and with the people who want to use it and precisely in the way they want to function.” (Vermeer, 1998) The skopos rule stands as the primary principle, with the remaining two principles falling under its subsidiary guidelines. In essence, the selection of translation methods and strategies during the translation process is contingent upon the intended purpose of the translation. The whole translation process is based on the intended purpose. Consequently, the translator must have a clear understanding of his translation objective prior to commencing the translation in order to attain the desired translation outcome.

The concept of coherence rule means that the necessity for a translation to adhere to the standard of intralingual coherence, wherein the readability and acceptability of the translation are adequate for comprehensibility and meaningfulness in the target culture and communicative context. Vermeer believes that “translation should be consistent with the recipient’s conditions in the context”. (Vermeer, 2001) In other words, before translating, the translator should understand the culture and communication situation embodied in the original text so that the recipient can understand it. Nord once said, “All a translator can do, and should do, is to translate a text that is at least meaningful to the recipient of the target culture.” (Nord, 2001) This requires translators to ensure that the translated sentences can be smooth, in line with the development of the plot, and can be understood by the audience.

The fidelity rule refers to the existence of intertextual coherence between the source text and the target text, which means that it should be coherence between the source text and the target text. This is equivalent to the so-called fidelity to the original text in other translation theories, but the degree and form of fidelity to the original text depend on the purpose of the translation and the translator’s understanding of the original text. Intertextual coherence is the faithful imitation of the original text to the greatest extent possible.

### 3. The Features of Subtitle Translation

#### 3.1 Timeliness

In terms of temporal constraints, the appearance and disappearance of subtitles must align with the commencement and conclusion of characters’ dialogue, necessitating the translator to convey the characters’ intended emotions to the audience at specific moments. In terms of space limitation, subtitles are confined to the translation or annotation of foreign language text displayed beneath a screen or TV, thus imposing spatial limitations. These constraints compel the translator to succinctly and vividly convey the characters’ emotions within the restricted temporal and spatial parameters (Wei Wu, 2013). In short, subtitle translation is to combine the original sound with the picture in a brief time, judiciously distribute and link text and imagery to the maximum original text’s meaning, ensure the audience’s viewing fluency, and deliver the most pertinent information in a concise duration.

#### 3.2 Commerciality

For Chinese audiences, foreign films are a heterogeneous system of images, words, sounds and other cultural symbols that are quite different from their inherent life logic and cognitive experience. Under the joint action of commercial interests, audience needs, cultural exchange and publicity, Chinese subtitles must take into account cultural context and hardware conditions, and help audiences establish a relatively

complete cognition of the meaning of images within a limited time and space, so as to achieve instant cross-cultural communication. (Ma Xiaochi, 2022) Therefore, film subtitle translation is commercial, which influenced by business. At the same time, a good subtitle translation can promote a film to better realize its commercial value.

#### 3.3 Aesthetic Requirements

Subtitle translation should be neither too straightforward nor too obscure. Subtitle translation must be concise, vivid, clear and fluent, easy to understand, elegant and popular. In terms of the choice of form and content and the processing of cultural information, more attention should be paid to the cognitive ability and appreciation habits of the target language audience on the basis of maintaining the artistic type and the language style of the characters in the film. (Jiang Yuwei & Zhang Shunsheng, 2023) Subtitle translation should adapt to factors such as different ages, educational levels and audiences in different regions, and adopt flexible and changeable methods that conform to social development trends and aesthetics.

### 4. Analyses of Subtitle Translation of *Coco* from the Perspective of the Three Rules of Skopos Theory

Under the guidance of skopos theory, this section analyzes the subtitler’s translation methods and strategies used in translating the subtitle of *Coco* from three perspectives: the skopos rule, the coherence rule and the fidelity rule, and the implication of their translation behavior.

#### 4.1 Subtitle Translation under the Skopos Rule

##### Example 1:

**ST (Source Text):** Who spent his life for complete strangers performing like a monkey.

**TT (Target Text):** 他一辈子又唱又跳，就在一群根本不认识的人面前。

This source text was used by Hector Rivera to describe Ernesto de la Cru to Miguel. The literal translation of the source text is “他一生都在为完全陌生的人表演，就像猴子一样。” By comparing the two translations, it can be found that when translating “performing like a monkey”, the film subtitle translator interprets it as “又唱又跳”, but if it is literally translated as “就像猴子一样表演”, the information transmission is not accurate. According to the aesthetic and timeliness of subtitle translation, the translator needs to present the information succinctly and clearly, while avoiding the purpose of too straightforward subtitle. According to the film, Ernesto de la Cru is a rock singer, so he is described as a “猴子”, and his “表演” is “唱歌” and “跳舞”, so the free translation is “又唱又跳”. The advantage of this approach is to avoid ambiguity in the audience’s understanding and to express its metaphor directly, which is easy for the audience to understand. In addition, the translation of the dialogue should be concise and to the point, so that the audience can quickly obtain the

most effective information in a short time.

In the process of translation, according to the timeliness of subtitle translation, the translator needs to make reasonable distribution and connection between the text and the picture. In order to present important information to the audience in advance and facilitate the audience to obtain the most useful information, the translator adjusts the word order of the translation, chooses to advance the important information, first says “又唱又跳”, and then points out the scene of “又唱又跳”, that is, “就在一群根本不认识的人面前”. In this way, the translator can express the original meaning to the greatest extent in a short time.

#### Example 2:

**ST:** Dia de los Muertos is the night of the year, our ancestors can come visit us. We've put their photos on the ofrenda, so their spirits can cross over.

**TT:** 一年也就趁着亡灵节, 过世的亲人们才能回趟家来看看咱们, 只有把他们的照片供在灵坛上, 他们的灵魂才能回来。

The beginning of the film tells that Miguel's family is busy preparing for the Day of the Dead. This sentence is what Miguel's grandmother Coco told Miguel. “Ofrenda” means “家用祭坛 (西班牙语)”. Considering that the film will be shown in China, the subtitle translator used the domestication translation strategy when translating this sentence, and translated “ofrenda” into “灵坛”. The Chinese word “灵坛” has the meaning of “祭坛”, which comes from *Book of Han*. The background information of this sentence is to prepare for the Day of the Dead. At this time, the translation of “ofrenda” into “灵坛” is more appropriate, and the film picture at that time is the “家用祭坛” arranged by Miguel's grandmother at home, so that Chinese audiences can quickly obtain information and understand the plot when watching the film. If it is directly translated into “祭坛”, the Chinese audience may first think of the huge ancient sacrificial platform, and it is mostly used for offering sacrifices to heaven or gods. Besides, due to the fast subtitle switching speed of animated films, the translator should take into account the transmission of efficient information in an effective time, so if translated into “家用祭坛” is too cumbersome, it is not easy for the audience to grasp the information. In this case, “灵坛” is the best choice of translation, coupled with the movie picture, which can efficiently and accurately convey the information to the audience. The purpose of film subtitle translation is to make a film can be successfully shown in a region, so that the audience of the target language can quickly understand the information to be conveyed by this picture and subtitle when watching the film. This translation strategy follows the skopos rule.

## 4.2 Subtitle Translation under the Coherence Rule

### Example 3:

**ST:** Buenas noches, Chicharron! I brought you a little offering.

**TT:** 晚上好! 猪皮哥, 我给你带了酒。

These two sentences appear in the background of Hector Rivera and Miguel to ask Chicharron to borrow a guitar. “Offering” in the source text has the meaning of “祭品, 贡品”, and the translation method of free translation is adopted here to translate “offering” into “酒”. Because the film takes place in the world of the dead most of the time, the money and supplies of the world of the dead are obtained through the method of the living, the things in the world of the dead are sacrifices, and the things brought here by Hector Rivera are naturally also offering, but Hector Rivera did not mention what offering was brought later. Instead, Chicharron is poured wine directly, and Hector Rivera is shown to have wine in his hand when he says this sentence. The purpose of film subtitle translation is to show the audience a two-dimensional combination of picture and sound, and the translator must combine dialogue, plot, characters and images and accurately convey them to the audience. In this way, the translated subtitles can be reflected with the picture, which meets the standard of intralingual coherence, and helps viewers to obtain information faster and more accurately, so as to achieve communicative effects.

### Example 4:

**ST:** They have to be passed down by those who knew us in life in the stories they tell about us. But there's no one left alive to pass down Cheech's stories.

**TT:** 只能由我们生前认识的人来传颂, 他们的记忆才管用, 活人的世界里没人再讲猪皮哥的故事了。

At this time, Hector Rivera and Miguel witness Chicharron's disappearance from the world of the dead. The source text is that Hector Rivera explains to Miguel about the rules of disappearance in the world of the dead, which states that if no one in the world of the living remembers the dead person, then he will disappear in the world of the dead. The first sentence is about the universally applicable rule, and the people who died include ordinary people and people with great deeds or achievements, so the first “pass down” is translated as “传颂”, and the interpretation of the first “pass down” is divided into two parts: one is to refer to the things that are praised, and the other is to spread praise, so the translation is in line with the context of the first sentence of the source text. The second sentence refers to the fact of Chicharron, that is, no one in the living world remembers Chicharron anymore, so Chicharron disappeared in the world of the dead, which is the really dead. From this, it can be inferred that Chicharron was probably not a highly respected person who made great

contributions and was remembered and celebrated by people, so he disappeared. Therefore, the second “pass down” is translated as “讲”, which conforms to the context of the second sentence of the source text. When translating the same phrase, the translator makes different translations according to different contexts, which is more in line with the setting and situation in the film, in line with the coherence rule of skopos theory, and can be more clearly understood by the audience. The explanation of this rule also explains why Hector Rivera wants Miguel to take a picture of himself back to his daughter for consecration, facilitating the plot of the film.

#### 4.3 Subtitle Translation under the Fidelity Rule

##### Example 5:

**ST:** We drank together and you told me you would move Heaven and Earth...

**TT:** 我们一起喝酒，你说你愿意为我披荆斩棘赴汤蹈火。

Hector Rivera and Ernesto de la Cru were musical partners, and in order to poison Hector Rivera and steal his songs, Ernesto de la Cru says to Hector Rivera, “I would move Heaven and Earth for you.” The translation strategy of naturalization is adopted in the translation. “Move Heaven and Earth” is an authentic expression in English, with the meaning of “竭尽全力”. The literal translation is “你说你愿意为我竭尽全力”, while the effect of emotional expression is not so strong and it is difficult to say that his false sincerity convinced Hector Rivera and drank the poison wine at that time. Therefore, the domestication translation strategy is adopted, the selection of Chinese idioms often used to express the profound friendship with friends, willing to do everything for them, and the use of two idioms “披荆斩棘赴汤蹈火” to express, enhance the effect, in line with the context. Due to the commercial character of subtitle translation, translators should take into account the cognitive habits and common expressions of target language audiences, so they adopt domestication translation strategies. In this way, the fidelity rule is followed while following the skopos rule and the coherence rule. Being faithful to the meaning, extent and effect of the original text can make it easier for Chinese audiences to understand the dialogue and plot development in the film.

##### Example 6:

**ST:** Oye! It's Mama Imelda. She couldn't cross over. She's stuck! -On the other side!

**TT:** 在这儿呢！老祖宗出事了，她今晚过不来了。她被拦下了！留在那边了！

The background of the source text is that Miguel meets his deceased relatives when he strays into the world of the dead. Because only the dead can enter the world of the dead, Miguel is in a near-death state at this time. His relatives are also very surprised and worried about his arrival, so Papa Julio said, “We need

Mamal melda.” At this point, two great-uncles, Oscar and Felipe, Tio Felipe, who have passed away, run up and say these words.

The translation is very vivid, because at this time the two uncles are running over, so they are translated into short sentences according to the original text, and the emotions are strong with the picture appears. At this time, the film has just appeared in the world of the dead, and the audience is also confused about it. “Struck” is the past participle and past tense of “strike” with the meaning of “撞；碰；撞击；碰撞；打；击；击打，踢（球等）”，so “struck” translates to “被拦下”. At this time, it is equivalent to setting the suspense for the audience, with the following plot can be learned in the film, that is, on the Day of the Dead, the deceased can return to the earth to reunite with their families, and the film behind shows the dead in a similar human checkpoint, the verification can be passed, otherwise it will be stopped. Therefore, the translation of “struck” as “被拦下” here is very vivid, so that the audience can better understand the plot. In the translation of film subtitles, the translators follow the principle of fidelity, follows the level design of the world of the living and the dead in the film, retains the characteristics of the source text, and achieves interlingual coherence. The audience can also understand that the level design blocks the road from the dead to the world of the living. On the basis of following the skopos rule and the coherence rule, the translator has achieved a faithful plot and setting, effectively demonstrating the plot effect, so that the audience can quickly grasp the information and understand the plot.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Film subtitle translation is a kind of cultural communication behavior with cross-language and cross-culture characteristics, which requires translators to consider not only the cognitive level and cultural background of the target audiences, but also the cultural habits and receptivity of the target language audiences. Therefore, translators should fully consider the cultural environment of the target audience and their acceptance of the target text when translating the film subtitles, and choose appropriate translation methods and strategies in accordance with the intentions of the target language readers and the original author. Taking the film *Coco* as an example and combining the examples of subtitle translation in the film, this article finds that the translator combines the function and purpose of film subtitle under the guidance of skopos theory, and makes translation according to the characteristics of film subtitle translation. In the process of translation, free translation, domestication and other translation methods and strategies are adopted in accordance with the rules of skopos, coherence and fidelity. The skopos rule is the core of skopos theory, and the coherence principle and the fidelity principle are subordinate to and guided by the



skopos principle. The author hopes that the case study in this article can provide references to subtitle translators.

**Note:** The cases come from the bilingual version of the movie *Coco* (translated and produced by AUGUST FIRST FILM STUDIO).

**Subtitle:** Siyuan Xu, Transn Internet of Languages Technology Co., Ltd.

## REFERENCES

- Vermeer, H. J. (1998). "Didactics of translation". In: Baker, M., & Saldanha, G. (eds.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Translation Studies*. London & New York: Routledge. 60-63.
- Vermeer, H. J. (2001). What does it mean to translate?. *Indian Journal of Applied Linguistics*.
- Nord, C. (2001). *Text Analysis in Translation-- Theory, Methodology, and Didactic Application of a Model for Translation-Oriented Text Analysis* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Linlin, D., & Linhai, W. (2014). A Study of the Subtitle Translation of *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf* from the Perspective of Skopos Theory [J]. *Movie Literature*, (08), 159-160.
- Wei, W. (2013). Language Characteristics and Translation Strategies of Film and Television Subtitle Translation [J]. *Movie Literature*, (24), 154-155.
- Xiaochi, M. (2022). Interpreting Paintings and Words: Chinese Subtitles of Foreign Films and Chinese Audience's Viewing Experience (1920—1949) [J]. *Journal of Beijing Film Academy*, (09), 120-128.
- Yuwei, J., & Shunsheng, Z. (2023). Movie Subtitle Translation Strategies --A Case Study of Sense and Sensibility [J/OL]. *Journal of University of Shanghai for Science and Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*: 1-5.